2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
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CHAPTER VII

BIRTH AND INFANCY

Conception and Contraception

It was a common belief among the Gros Ventres that for conception to occur, sex relations must continue over a period of time, conception could not occur as the result of one copulation. The fact that a girl would be given in marriage before she reached physiological maturity tended to confirm this belief, which is also linked with another one, namely, that a girl would not menstruate unless and until she had experienced sex relations. This latter belief is reflected in comments made by old women concerning the young unmarried girls of the present day. Coming Daylight and Singer remarked on several occasions: "Nowadays girls are 'terrible.' They menstruate and have well-developed figures before they are married." These signs of physical maturity the old women take as absolute evidence of loose conduct on the part of the girl, regardless of what the facts in the individual case may be.

The Gros Ventres apparently recognized some relationship between conception and lactation. Coming Daylight, for instance, said: "The Indian women claim that they didn't become pregnant so soon if they nursed their babies. They always used to carry their infants about with them because, if they went far away and left them, their milk might spoil. The old-timers used to say that if a woman took good care of her children and kept them close to her, her family would not increase so rapidly. It is the young ones nowadays who have the bottle-fed babies!"

There were certain precautions, too, that a woman should take to keep her offspring properly spaced. "If you sit in the place from which a pregnant woman has just risen, you will conceive immediately. Dispose of the afterbirth quickly. Destroy all clothing worn during pregnancy, even moccasins, or give them to some woman past child-bearing age. If a woman put these clothes on again she would soon become pregnant. Nowadays though mo-

might even 'fuss' a little with him, saying something like: 'Look at you! I thought I told you to urinate. I'm trying to make you do it at the right time, and you want to hold back!' But we were not harsh with infants because we knew they have to learn. Anyway, if you misjudged the time, all you had to do was to throw out the powdered chips and put in fresh ones. The old way was much better. These diaper-babies around here now are much more trouble."

If a child developed enuresis, a tiny bit of the tail of a fox or of a beaver tied to his belt, or a piece of badger skin for him to sit on, was thought to guarantee a cure.

To help the child who had trouble teething, it was considered wise to kill a mouse, skin it, take the back thigh and, after cooking it well, rub on the gums. It is said by Coming Daylight that the Crow used fish for this purpose. Some children have such a difficult time that their gums are very sore and their tongues even swell. Coming Daylight's grandmother and others knew how to remedy that condition. The doctor, using a sharp-pointed bone, would lance the gums here and there where the teeth were coming, after allowing the gums to bleed, they would rub some powdered root on the gums. As a preventive, old folks said to catch tiny baby mice and, after roasting them on the coals, feed them to the child. Coming Daylight, for instance, did that for her children, and none of them had any trouble with teething.

They would let babies crawl when they showed the inclination to do so, but the old women were sure that they always watched their babies more closely than mothers do today. They used to encourage them to walk by holding them up and helping them. It has been Coming Daylight's experience that boys learn to walk more quickly than girls. It may be, however, that more attention was given to boys.

The only expression the old women, or the younger ones for that matter, could think of that could be considered "baby talk" was that babies, when very small and just beginning to talk, say: "I" (prolonged and with strong glottal stop) if they do not like something or do not wish to take what is offered. This, together with *na'a* 'mother' and *ni'a* 'father,'[9]—which babies say properly

[9] These are vocative forms rather than descriptive forms.

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right off,—are about the first words a baby says. When a child is backward in learning to talk, the remedy is to feed him meadow-lark eggs, hard-boiled. Cora says this treatment was very effective for one of her sons, and Coming Daylight fed them to one of her daughters. They all agreed, however, that the treatment may sometimes be too effective. If anyone is very talkative even today the favorite saying is: "His mother must have fed him meadow-lark eggs."

The care of her baby was the first duty of a mother. Of course, if she were a co-wife, the other wives might help her, and in any case the grandmother might take a hand. But Coming Daylight often had no one upon whom she could depend, so she had to be extremely careful. For example, when she was married to Little Man and had an infant in the toddling stage, she would drape a blanket loosely about her hips and while she sat and did beadwork, the infant could play safely at her left hip inside the blanket. The old-timers, moreover, never left a baby alone. When her first child was born Coming Daylight was told by her grandmother never to leave a baby alone; that if it were absolutely necessary she should leave him even for a minute, she should take a small stick, blacken the tip with nicotine, and leave it in the swing or alongside where the infant lay. This was done to keep the "spirits" away. Even Mary feels strongly about leaving a child alone. She tells her daughter about it, but the daughter is very modern. The result is that frequently Mary stays home from a dance rather than leave a grandchild by itself.

If the mother of a young infant was going on a trip, for instance, to pick berries, she invited the baby's *bitd"tav* 'shadow, spirit, soul' saying: "Come on with us or we might leave you. We are going now." If one failed to do this, it would be like leaving part of the baby behind and the baby would be cross all evening.

Sometimes other children in the family would be called upon to look after the infant. They were apt to get tired quickly however and tell their mother: "Hurry up and take your baby or I will drop it." Girls were depended upon more than boys to look after younger siblings, and girls more or less were expected to do so "right from the beginning." The old women felt that formerly

has been given up, the Gros Ventres are so sunburned that their skin looks almost "black." Singer showed a small bag of red paint which she still had. She kept a piece of beaver castor in the bag so the paint would be sweet-smelling.

In the old days the Gros Ventres were early risers. Everyone got up while it was still dark, perhaps about three o'clock in summer and before seven in winter. It didn't make any difference whether a child might otherwise be favored, the rule was ironclad that all must rise early and that no one should lie abed. This applied to all—old people as well as to children.

One method of making sure that children would be strong was to take a beaver tail and slap the child on the hand and on the back while saying: "You will be good and strong." Mary, for instance, has seen her mother do this to all her grandchildren, hitting them so hard they almost cried. The beaver is considered a very strong animal since he cuts down big trees and drags them about.

Naming and Ear-piercing

Every individaul received a name shortly after birth. Many Gros Ventres, however, were, and are, known by names other than the original one. Names were changed for particular reasons, and in addition nicknames were frequently employed. Sometimes the first name was bestowed with considerable formality, but naming could be carried out in a variety of ways,[10] as the following examples show.

"Shortly after Coming Daylight was born, her father sent for his sister's husband and told him: 'Now I invited you to name your niece. I am giving you such-and-such kind of horse' (a bay, or a pinto, or whatnot). There was a big feast on this occasion and the lodge was full of people. The namer sat in the place of honor at the back of the lodge. He held the infant in his arms, told a war deed and said: 'Now I name her 'Taken A Prisoner.' Then he said a long prayer, starting with the usual formula, and wishing the infant a long life. He then handed the infant to the person to his left saying: 'Take Taken A Prisoner'; and so the infant was passed all around the lodge, each repeating the same to

[10] Cf. Kroeber, 1908, p. 182.

861 to their daughters.[10] The lecturing of the child started when he was an infant and continued until adulthood had been attained. Those charged with the training of children felt it to be a duty. As Coming Daylight put it: "They talked to their children right from the start, and before the babies themselves were able to talk, they seemed to understand." Singer remarked that, because modern parents do not talk to infants as the old-fashioned ones used to do, present-day infants do not respond by trying to "talk back." Nowadays, the two old women insisted, even infants pay no attention to instruction, and as for older children, some go so far as to tell their elders to shut up!

Under the old regime, however, a child had to listen, whether he wanted to or not, and he had to retain, at least outwardly, a respectful attitude. Cora, for instance, said that she hated this being talked to. Her father was the one who did the lecturing in her family and he used to require that she stand in one spot and not move "while he preached about being good and the ways of doing everything." Singer and Coming Daylight admitted that it was tiresome for the child to be continuously lectured, but they insisted that this is the best way for children to learn. Children [856] are supposed to really grasp what is being said to them from about the age of four.

867 Thick remembers the general content of the lectures he heard
183 from his mother to have run along these lines: "If you get a mare, treat it well because mares will increase. Take good care of her. If you get a saddle, hang on to it. Robes, bridles, whips, are needed useful articles, keep them, don't give them away. If you don't keep these things you will have to go and borrow from someone else. That is bad. If you have to borrow a horse from some other boy, his family might become suspicious of you; yet if they refuse, there are hard feelings over it. Therefore when you get something, take good care of it.

"When you go out to play with your own things, your bow and arrows or hoop, others will want you to play with them and to bet with them. If you join in such games, somebody is likely to get mad because you have won and so he may beat you up. If

[10] For details on kinship behavior, see pp. 107–08.